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Greening Outdoor Practice

by Dr Kate Rawles

It's a wild and beautiful day and you are walking in the hills – the Glyders, say – with a group of young people. Tryfan, Glyder Fawr, Glyder Fach; a horseshoe of craggy summits coming in and out of the clouds. Birds fly up, chattering and scolding as you pass. There's a raven crarking over the sound of the river and, underfoot, mats of purple thyme amongst the rocks. The group is moving well and spirits are high. Just ahead of them, you pull over a small rise and there, spreading out in front of you..... is a dirty great pile of litter.

How would you respond? I'd bet a month's salary and a bottle of Laphroaig that 99% of people reading this would stop and pick it up. You'd almost certainly engage the group in the task, and use the incident to open up a discussion about outdoor ethics. Litter is obvious; packing or not packing out poo considerably less so. Then there's shutting gates, thinking how to minimise footpath erosion, and all those questions about where and how to camp. As outdoor professionals we are really good at this stuff. And it's important not just because of the actual impact – visual, ecological and otherwise – of the litter or camping scars or misplaced sheep; but because of the message it sends out about caring for the environments we love to work and play in.

But what about the bigger picture? Are we seeing the wood for the trees? What if we are so focused on picking up litter that we haven't noticed the avalanche roaring up behind us? Our impacts on the environment, as ordinary people who live in ordinary, 'modern', high consumption, fossil fuel driven societies are of a totally different magnitude from litter. They are potentially devastating, long-term and irreversible. Unless we do something about them. Unless we do the equivalent of stopping to pick them up – and engaging those around us as we do it. I'm talking about climate change, of course. And my argument is that outdoor professionals are supremely well placed to play an effective and important leadership role in tackling it. There is a problem though – many of us who are practicing now were not taught basic climate change science or exposed to environmental issues in the way young people now are.

Greening Outdoor Practice is a short postgraduate course created in response to this. It offers outdoor professionals an overview of our major environmental challenges and debates how we might best tackle them in practice.

But is climate change really happening? Isn't it all highly debatable? If it is happening will it really be that bad? And can we do anything about it that will make any difference anyway?

Three things are critical here. The first is to separate what is certain from what is still up for debate. The basic science of climate change is, unfortunately, rock solid. Carbon dioxide molecules retain heat. We have put massively more of them into the atmosphere. The atmosphere is retaining more heat. Anyone who can successfully challenge any of those statements should, as George Monbiot puts it, present themselves for a Nobel Prize in atmospheric chemistry forthwith. It's this increase in the average global temperature of the atmosphere – aka global warming – that is causing local climates to change around the world. Exactly what these changes will be is still up for debate.

Some places will get hotter, some drier, some wetter. Overall, atmospheric or global warming has been likened to turning up the heat under a saucepan of water. The extra energy has to go somewhere. So as well as changing climates it's expected to increase incidents of severe weather. Storms, floods, draughts, hurricanes. Scientists have, for example, just been able to establish a causal link between climate change and the recent unusually heavy rainfall and flooding in England and Wales.

Another area of certainty is the human contribution to this astonishing transformation of our own life-support system. Fossil fuel consumption, the main human cause of CO₂ and other 'greenhouse gas' emissions, has increased a massive 80% in thirty years. If you think of fossil fuels as ancient sunlight – as energy harnessed direct from the sun by long-dead, photosynthesising plants and then stored as oil, coal and gas – we humans now use 100,000 years of ancient sunlight to power our hi-tech lives every year. And at the same time, we are cutting down forests and degrading other ecosystems that act as natural carbon off-setters, by absorbing CO₂ from the air and converting it into plant matter. It's an appalling double whammy. The end result is more CO₂ in the atmosphere now than there has been for 650,000 years.

The second critical thing is that we need to get real. If we don't get our carbon emissions under

control we are looking at 'runaway' climate change. Runaway climate change is not some abstract theory – it's an inevitability if we don't change direction. And runaway climate change is not just a bit of bad weather. It will bring us drastic, sudden and major discontinuities in our weather systems and cause catastrophic social and ecological disruption. This is not just about melting icecaps and the tragic demise of distant polar bears. This is about conflict over water; collapsing agricultural systems; massive displacement of people; the extinction of millions of species. To prevent it we need 80% cuts in climate emissions across the industrialised world. And this, as Al Gore puts it with masterful understatement, is a truly inconvenient truth.

The good news? Most analysts agree there is still time to turn this around – to contain climate change just short of the tipping point – so long as we act effectively, together and fast. And so long as – and here's the third critical thing – we act on the basis of accurate knowledge about what really makes a difference; and what is sweating the small stuff to no effect. A single flight to Australia uses about the same amount of energy as leaving the TV on for 300 years; a transatlantic

flight blows a year's carbon budget in one go. There's no point, as Mike Berners-Lee points out in his wonderfully carbon-perspectivising book, *How Bad are Bananas*, agonizing over whether to use paper towels or automatic hand-driers in the toilets of the airport departure lounge. Or cycling to work fuelled by out-of-season air-freighted asparagus. There is a lot of point in figuring out ways of reducing flights, meat eating, car use and house-and-buildings heating.

So, why pick on outdoor professionals to help lead the changes we need? For one thing, we already have a head-start. In a world where 50% of the human population now live in cities, where UK children spend an average of nearly six hours a day watching screens, where people of all ages are increasingly disconnected from their reliance on nature and their impacts on it; outdoor professionals are, well, outdoors! We are likely to have a greater sense of connection with outdoor environments, with the mountains, rivers, forests and oceans we work on and in; and a sense of love and concern for these places. Few outdoor professionals who learn what climate change means for mountain ecosystems – the 'canaries of climate change' – or for other wild places, species and habitats are likely not to care. And we can use the inspirational power of the places we work in to inspire others to feel the same way – and more importantly, to act.



What sort of actions? In Greening Outdoor Practice we've tried to group the things we can do into three main areas.

- 1) Get informed. Then raise awareness of the issues, and pass on accurate and perspectivising information. Given the high profile of climate change in the media – or perhaps because of it! – there is a remarkable lack of understanding about what it is, what it means and how best to act. As outdoor professionals we can find a thousand ways to communicate to our colleagues, our clients and our communities. We can put information about energy use in our centres and use food miles as an opener for debate. We can make connections between our ordinary lives and their impacts 'downstream' – as real as if we do our washing upstream on the river we drink out of while camping. We can use a forest or even a twig to start a discussion about our place in the carbon cycle. There are a multitude of 'teachable moments' we can use in the field.**
- 2) Lower our own negative impacts. Anything we can do to reduce our fossil fuel based energy consumption is important – in relation to ourselves, our buildings and our activities. Could we lift-share or bike to work more often? Is there anything more we could do to reduce energy use in the centre? Change the light-bulbs? Insulate? Change how we use energy? How far are we prepared to drive to a venue? Are there closer alternatives and could we sometimes use local transport? What about the food we're using? How much is local and, perhaps more challenging, how much is meat-based?**
- 3) Find ways of harnessing the power of the amazing places we work in to inspire and support positive change and champions. We are already excellent at personal development and team building. But how often do we focus these skills on working together to solve major, complex environmental problems? This is critical if we are to tackle climate change. No one can do it alone. And we know there's a gap between understanding the issues and actually acting. We can support people across that boundary by engaging emotion as well as intellect, making it real, making it matter. It's easy around a campfire – or even a Trangia – to make connections between the things we really need – food, water, clean air – and the ecological systems that provide us with them. And with only small changes we can change the implicit messages we give, presenting the environment not (or not just!) as an outdoor gym or hostile terrain or convenient green backdrop for personal development but as a habitat where a million other species live and die; an immense complex interconnected system of which we too are a part and on which we utterly depend. We can help reveal its beauty. We can inspire desire to protect and champion.**



Above all, perhaps, we can explore our own values. For all its importance, climate change is a symptom. It's a symptom of the collision between our ways of life – built on the indefinite pursuit of growth and consumption – and the ecological limits of our planet. If everyone on earth lived the life of an average western European, we would

need three planets. What better place than the hills to get a bit of perspective on 'ordinary life' and ask questions about what quality of life is really about? Is it branded trainers and quantities of stuff? Or are quality time, relationships and connection in truth rather more important? Moving towards one-planet living in general, and tackling climate change in particular, will involve big changes and some of them hard. Flying really is an issue, and so is meat. I've personally tried to negotiate the conflict between a love of exploring and carbon impact by rationing flights to once every three years. It's not easy; though I have spent more time in Scotland as a result. And that's the other side of all this of course – there are some great win wins. Amongst the biggest impact we could have as individuals is to work a bit less, earn a bit less, consume a bit less – and play a lot harder. I don't fly as much as I used to. But I do spend a lot more time in the hills.

In sum? We urgently need leadership if the environments we work and play in are to be protected from the big, difficult human impacts as well as the litter-shaped ones. If our professions don't show it, who will? ■

Author's Notes

Greening Outdoor Practice is offered by the University of Cumbria's Outdoor Studies Department at Ambleside. It can be taken as a three module short programme or a one-week stand alone course. Both offer an overview of major environmental issues, including climate change, and cutting edge debate about root causes – and effective solutions. For more information please go to our website: <http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/Courses/Subjects/ScienceNaturalResources/Postgraduate/GreeningOutdoorPractice.aspx> or email kate.rawles@cumbria.ac.uk



Dr Kate Rawles works half-time as a senior lecturer in Outdoor Studies at the University of Cumbria. She teaches environmental issues in a wide range of contexts including Greening Outdoor Practice – a three-module postgraduate programme for outdoor practitioners which she designed and leads. Her free-lance work includes running Outdoor Philosophy courses, – using the power of wild places to explore environmental values; working with Jonathon Porritt on Forum for the Future's 'Reconnections' course and lecturing on sustainable development. In 2006 she cycled from Texas to Alaska, following the spine of the Rockies and exploring N.American beliefs about climate change. The trip forms the basis of the Carbon Cycle slide show, numerous articles and a forthcoming book. Photograph of Kate from herself, can on lake shore by Stef Kerek. Others with creative commons license.